

The Gettysburg Address

Directions: The information presented in this reading can help you understand the Gettysburg Address better by giving you some background information on the speech, often described as the greatest speech ever delivered by an American president. Read the "Historical Context" and then answer the questions.

The Gettysburg Address: A Historical Context

The Battle of Gettysburg was a turning point in the Civil War. General Lee was turned back from his northern invasion into Pennsylvania by the Union army, led by General George Meade. This was the last time General Lee tried to bring the Army of Northern Virginia into the North.

After three days of fighting (July 1-3, 1863), nearly 40,000 soldiers were killed and many more were wounded. Residents of Gettysburg raised the idea of creating a national cemetery on the site. Pennsylvania Governor Curtin responded quickly and by mid-July a plan was put into operation. Bodies were gathered together and buried in a large site located on Cemetery Hill.

A United States Cemetery Board of Commissions was placed in charge of creating the national cemetery. They wanted to dedicate the ground in a formal ceremony that would honor the final resting place for so many fallen soldiers. They selected the Honorable Edward Everett of Massachusetts, one of the best-known speakers in America. Others well-known people were invited, too, including the President Lincoln, cabinet members, General Meade, members of the diplomatic corps, and members of the House and Senate. The formal invitation to the President was sent on November 2nd, weeks after Everett's invitation. The invitation asked Lincoln say something briefly at the conclusion of the ceremony. Edward Everett's oration was the central focus; President Lincoln was the conclusion. The invitation said, "It is the desire that, after the Oration, you, as Chief Executive of the Nation, formally set apart these grounds to their Sacred use by a few appropriate remarks." This he agreed to do, and he went on to do it in two minutes with ten memorable sentences totaling 272 often quoted words. Mr. Everett spoke for two hours and four minutes that afternoon. What he said was not a surprise to the audience because the text of his speech had been published and widely distributed days before the event. There did not appear to be much interest in what the President would say. His reputation as a storyteller had even made some Board of Commissions members fear that he would not be up to such a solemn occasion. How wrong they were.

The day following the dedication, Mr. Everett sent a note to President Lincoln congratulating him for his address. He said, "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes." In his reply Lincoln noted that Everett was expected to make the long speech. He said, "In our respective parts yesterday, you could not have been excused to make a short

address, nor I a long one.”

ot everyone at the time agreed with Mr. Everett’s assessment of the Gettysburg Address. The *Harrisburg Patriot and Union* newspaper made fun of his short speech, “We pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall no more be repeated or thought of.”

The same Gettysburg Address later memorized by generations of school children and widely proclaimed as the greatest American speech ever given was also criticized by the *Chicago Times*, “The cheeks of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat, and dishwatery utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to intelligent foreigners as the President of the United States.”

Many other newspapers felt as Edward Everett did. They recognized the beauty, clarity, and simplicity of the word. They sensed that these words would live on because they condensed the unique American experience into a timeless expression of the national values of freedom, liberty, and equality.

The *Springfield Republican* called it, “ a perfect gem; deep in feeling, compact in thought and expression, and tasteful and elegant in every word and comma.” The *Providence Journal* had high praise, “We know not where to look for a more admirable speech than the brief one which the President made at the close of Mr. Everett’s oration...” Lincoln’s ability with the English language permitted him to craft a ten-sentence statement that would bring admiration from wordsmiths, but the speech is more than the arrangement of words. The words speak of ideas, not the recent battle. The ideas were not new, but there is nothing wrong or un-American with that. In fact, you could argue that Declaration of Independence was the product of political theorists and philosophers of the Enlightenment, not Thomas Jefferson’s imagination. So, too, were the words in the Gettysburg Address. The ideas so persuasively expressed on November 19, 1863, were not new. They were embedded in the Republican Party platforms of 1860 and 1864. They also found expression in other speeches that Lincoln gave during his political career, both before and after the Gettysburg Address, as well as in personal letters and other primary sources.

(The four newspaper quotes come from the website:
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/gettysburg/ideas>)

Name: _____ Section: _____ Date: _____

The Origins of the Gettysburg Address: Questions

1) List two things that were special or significant about the Battle of Gettysburg.

2) How can you tell that the people in charge of the cemetery dedication didn't think President Lincoln would be an important part of the ceremony?

3) What newspapers were critical of the Gettysburg Address and why?

4) Give some examples of what those who praised this speech in 1863 thought of it.
